focus on women

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Women and the Environment

by Bella Abzug

Clean air and water. Fertile soil. Easy access to replenishable sources of non-toxic food, fuel and energy. Preservation of biodiversity in natural resources, lakes, rivers, oceans, forests, plant and animal species. Sustainable development. Protection of our ancient, beautiful, increasingly vulnerable planet from a plague of man-made pollutants, new technologies and economic practices that adversely affect the rights, health and lives of Earth's inhabitants.

Add to their belief in these elemental life-preserving principles the belief that women can make a difference, and we have the remarkable story of how in the closing years of the twentieth century women of every class, colour and culture have emerged as a powerful organized force for positive change around the world. Everywhere, women are catalysts and initiators of environmental and democratic activism, demanding an equal voice in "fate of the Earth" decisions and an end to the poverty and exploitative development patterns that often primarily victimize women and children.

As individuals and in thousands of new as well as long-established women's organizations, ranging from community groups to international networks, women are bringing their unique life experiences, concerns, perspectives and holistic analyses into the processes through which the United Nations, Governments, international finance, transnational corporations and public and private institutions shape policies that affect their lives.

Women as natural resource managers

Women have joined the global debate on environment from a broad range of entry points. Their involvement may take the form of transforming simple household chores, such as women in Yemen do by reusing scarce water ... or planting 10 million trees in Africa's innovative Green Belt Movement, initiated by Wangari Maathai of Kenya, to combat desertification and provide income for poor women ... recycling garbage and cleaning up polluted lakes and rivers, as women in the United States, Canada and Europe do ... risking their lives in civil disobedience as the Chipko women tree-huggers in India did to save the local forest on which their livelihoods depend ... organizing demonstrations against toxic dumps and nuclear tests ... opposing expulsion of indigenous people from their traditional lands ... or using their expertise as scientists, technologists, economists and educators have done to devise alternative environmental-and-people-friendly models of development ... and, as physicist Vandana Shiva of India has done, to launch an international campaign against genetic engineering of seeds and food by transnational corporations, a practice that she charges deprives local food growers of their property rights and sustainable approach to agriculture and exposes consumers to health risks. Women have moved into the forefront of environmental initiatives because they are typically the first to

recognize environmental problems and are most directly affected by them. In Africa, Asia, Latin America and other developing regions, women are often the primary users and managers of land, forests, water and other natural resources.

About half the world's food is grown by women. In Africa they produce nearly all the food their families consume, while Asian and Latin American women typically carry out key stages of production and processing for staple crops and are the main producers of vegetables, and livestock for the household. Thus they acquire important knowledge of local soil conditions, growing cycles and other environmental features and are able to use this knowledge for conservation. Women in the Andean regions of South America, for example, maintain the seed banks on which the local crops depend. Gambian women grow most of the rice in their country and have initiated dyke-building schemes and created vegetable plots to protect and enrich the local soil.

Throughout much of the developing world, women also have primary responsibility for gathering fuel, food and fodder from forest areas and for

collecting and managing water. Women's traditional use of these natural resources has generally ensured their availability for future use. For example, rural women throughout India prefer to collect dead branches for fuelwood rather than cut down live trees.

But women often bear the worst consequences of industrial logging, commercial fishing and other activities that ignore the principle of sustainability. If large tracts of forests are destroyed, if fishing supplies dwindle, if water supplies dry up or are contaminated by pesticides, if huge dams are built, displacing thousands of families from their traditional homes, it is women who have to cope with the increased difficulties of day-to-day survival for their families. In Nepal, for example, women whose grandmothers spent only two hours fetching wood and fodder now face all-day mountain climbs to carry out the same task.

Women as consumer activists

Women in Europe, North America and other industrialized regions are the majority of consumers, shopping for their families' needs as well as their own. Their purchasing choices have potentially tremendous influence over business practices. Here, too, women are initiators of movements that promote consumers' awareness of the environmental impact of various products. Inspired by Rachel Carson's ground-breaking 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, which sounded the first alarm about pesticides, women have taken the lead in alerting buyers to possible dangers in the widespread use of chemical pollutants, toxic sprays and radiation.

In the United Kingdom, the Women's Environment Network led a campaign to educate the public about the environmental and health problems associated with chlorine-bleached paper products; as a result chlorine is no longer used to bleach diapers, tea bags and other products. In the United States, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) has organized public hearings with environmental groups and breast cancer victims to focus attention and research funds on links between environmental pollutants and diseases of the reproductive system. The impetus for the coalition effort is the growing epidemic of breast cancer that affects one out of eight women in the United States over an 85-year life-span. Women in other countries are joining the campaign designed to identify environment-cancer links and take preventive measures to protect women's health.

Making connections

The coming of age of the global women's environment movement was spurred by two major United Nations actions. A UN commission headed by Norway's ecology-minded Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, issued a ground-breaking study, "Our Common Future", linking the environmental crisis to unsustainable development and financial practices that were worsening North/South inequities, with women a majority of the world's poor and illiterates. And the General Assembly mandated a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), an Earth Summit to be held in Rio de Janeiro, together with a parallel NGO Forum, in June 1992.

In preparation for the Rio conference, two seminal events were held that have since been described as a watershed in addressing the linkages between the global ecological crisis, development inequities, population concerns and the status of women and girls. Sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme and organized by WorldWIDE network, the Global Assembly of Women and the Environment in November 1991 brought together in Miami, Florida, more than 200 women who represented environmental "success stories" — grass-roots initiatives that were considered visible, sustainable, affordable and replicable. Their stories demonstrated that women were effective environmental leaders in solving a wide variety of problems in every region of the world.

Immediately following the Assembly, WEDO held the first World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, which featured dozens of workshops and a tribunal of five women judges taking testimony from 15 women experts who presented documented analyses of how the environment/development crisis affected and involved women. Attended by 1,500 women from 83 countries, the Congress aimed to bring women's perspectives into the discussions and drafting of UNCED's Agenda 21 and other official documents. Congress participants formulated and unanimously adopted their own agenda, Women's Action Agenda 21, which was presented on the spot to UNCED Secretary-General Maurice Strong, who praised the women's efforts.

Women's Action Agenda 21 made recommendations on practical steps

Women and the environment: success stories

In **Russia,** Maria Cherkasova, an internationally acclaimed ecologist who specializes in rare and endangered species, believes that nuclear testing, fallout and such disasters as Chernobyl and similar less-publicized accidents are responsible for her country's fast-growing human mortality rates. An increasing number of babies are born with abnormalities and 75 per cent of pregnant women have serious health problems, she says. Her Centre for Independent Ecological Programmes has created the Suzdal Children's Centre where children with environmental health problems can be rehabilitated in unpolluted surroundings, a project that won her the United Nations Environment Programme's Global 500 Award in 1992.

In **Japan,** when painter Mayumi Oda learned that her Government was importing 1.7 tons of reprocessed plutonium from France — the most toxic radioactive substance on earth — she contacted several Japanese women's groups and they founded The Plutonium-Free Future Women's Network. The group organized international protests that resulted in several Governments denying the plutonium shipments passage through their territorial waters. The network is conducting a worldwide campaign demanding an end to all nuclear weapons and a ban on the production, transportation and reprocessing of plutonium and other nuclear wastes.

In **Palau,** a tiny island with a population of 15,000 located midway between the Philippines and Indonesia, women have struggled against international pressures for 12 years to uphold a nuclear-free constitution, the only one in the world. Julita Tellei founded the Palau Resource Institute five years ago to convince people that environmental, social and cultural impact assessments must be done before a development project begins. She was among the leaders of the successful effort of Otil a Belaud, a women's and young people's organization, to block Japanese, Iranian and American plans to build a superport oil terminal in Palau. "If we allowed oil tankers and there was an accident", she says, "the entire livelihood of the island — tourism and fishing — would be gone." The superport plans were dropped, and for its work the group received a UN Environment Programme's Global 500 Award in 1993.

In **Colombia,** Alegria Fonseca, a member of Parliament, conducted an ongoing campaign to stave off tourist development in a coastal reserve rich in wildlife species and habitat. In other Latin American countries women have been instrumental in promoting self-sufficient agriculture, the preservation and use of indigenous plants, and the preservation of rain forests. In Brazil, environmental lawyer Sonia Regina de Burito Pereira is in the forefront of the campaign to preserve the Amazon River. A Venezuelan woman, Alicia Garcia Scarton, was pivotal in opposing a proposed TransAmazon car race and rally that would cut through a pristine wilderness area. Other highly trained women have started successful fish-farming projects, fostered organic farming, initiated bans on logging and introduced appropriate technologies.

In **Madagascar,** where 90 per cent of the original forest has disappeared, Charlotte Rajeriarison initiated an environmental education programme that teaches farmers how to fertilize soil with animal manure as an alternative to burning the forest for nutrients. Children and adults also learn to practise agro-forestry techniques that protect the soil while producing larger harvests. Her efforts earned Ms. Rajeriarison UNEP's Global 500 Award.

In **Indonesia,** women in the mountain village of Bumiredjo responded to recurring diarrhoea epidemics (due to contaminated water) by initiating a project to secure water from a spring located 500 metres above in a neighbouring village. After negotiating access to the spring with leaders of the other village, they designed and raised funds for a new water system, which it took three years for village men to build. The system is managed collectively, with women taking turns cleaning the communal water facilities and collecting maintenance fees from each household. As a result of the clean water supply, infant mortality has decreased dramatically and diarrhoea has largely been eliminated. Women are now able to devote more time to income-generating activities. The improved water supply supports agriculture, fish farming and livestock production and has contributed to raising the villagers' incomes and standard of living.

that could be taken by the UN, Governments, industry and NGOs on a host of linked issues, including equality for women in decision-making, democratic rights, militarism and the environment, foreign debt and trade, poverty, land rights and credit for women, population policies and women's health, biodiversity and biotechnology, nuclear power and alternative energy, environmental ethics, and use of women's consumer power to protect the environment.

The women's agenda became a unifying force among concerned women NGOs around the world as they worked together during the UN preparatory process leading up to Rio. Broadly representative women's caucuses engaged in the biggest ever advocacy effort at the UNCED PrepComs, with the result that the final Agenda 21 approved at Rio dedicated an entire chapter to women's roles in sustainable development and also included about 120 other references and recommendations related to women throughout the document.

Towards Beijing

The issues-linkages developed during the UNCED process have produced the most diverse, well-informed, effective and rapidly growing international women's rights movement in history. Based on their experiences with the Earth Summit process, women NGOs have been turning out in record numbers and transforming policy documents approved at subsequent UN conferences at Vienna (human rights), Cairo (population and development), Barbados (small islands) and Copenhagen (social development). All these documents are infused with recognition of women's crucial roles in environment and development.

In all their splendid diversity, expertise and passionate concerns, unprecedented numbers of women have been attending preparatory meetings for the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace in Beijing this September. Up to 30,000 women will be participating in the parallel NGO Forum (30 August – 8 September) and women are also expected to be a majority of the official delegates that will adopt the Platform for Action document.

As a result of women's ongoing organized efforts, the Platform for Action to be adopted at Beijing includes a section devoted to the crucial roles of women in environmental management. It includes important recommendations to the UN, Governments, international organizations, the private sector and NGOs to ensure that women are fully involved in environmental development decision-making and that their priorities and perspectives are reflected in all aspects of decision-making.

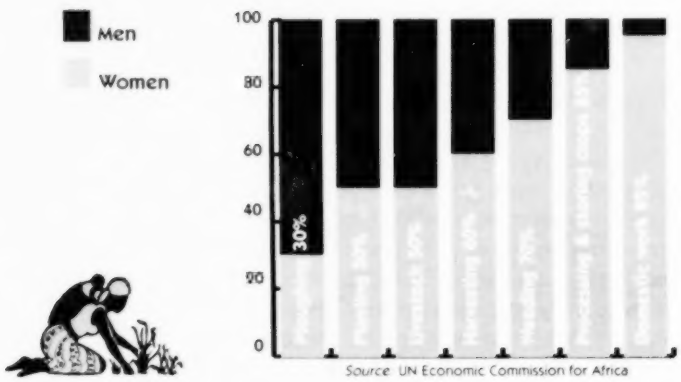
By reiterating the need for greater recognition and support for women's concerns, the Platform for Action will remind the world that ensuring the survival and well-being of our planet requires the full empowerment of the female half of humanity.

Bella Abzug is a founder and one of the 10 regional co-chairs of the U.S.-based Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO).

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the United Nations.

Division of labour

Women in Africa do up to three quarters of all agricultural work in addition to their domestic responsibilities



Source: UN Economic Commission for Africa